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ABSTRACT

A theory of style called the doctrine of synonymity argues that the separation of form from content allows the possibility of alternative phrasing. This theory led to the conception that during the writing process, writers consider different ways of phrasing and settle on the formulation that best expresses the meaning intended. However, the ranking of "best" suggests that synonymity does not adequately explain the relations between intention and expression. If two sentences can be reasonably paraphrased, then the doctrine of synonymity seems tenable. For the purpose of teaching style, however, the theory of rhetorical dualism is of limited use, since the doctrine of synonymity provides no guidance for making the best choice among alternative modes of expression. Nevertheless, the concept of style as choice offers a beginning for developing a theory of style that is both rhetorical and process-centered. If style is seen as the adaptation of form to rhetorical aim, it acknowledges the relationship between meaning structure and aim, suggests that form and meaning ultimately coincide, and allows for the acquisition of linguistic forms as preliminary to their use in a rhetorical setting. The transition from style analysis to style production follows the logic of a process-centered model, which not only allows stages in the acquistion of stylistic competence, but proposes that the proper object of style study in composition teaching is ultimately the student's own work. (HOD)

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Leonora Woodman

Toward a Rhetorical Theory of Style

Some years ago, Louis Milic advised that a theory of style adequate to the teaching of composition required the separation of form and content.[1] Concerned that the modern theory of organic form (supposedly popular among composition teachers trained as literary specialists) allowed for no element that could properly be called style, Milic called for a return to the classical doctrine of rhetorical dualism, for only then could the formal features of written discourse be isolated, discussed, and taught. To support the separation of substance from style, Milic invoked the doctrine of synonymity, arguing that the divisibility of form from content allowed for the possibility of alternative phrasing, "of different ways of saying the same thing."[2] The Crocean view that every utterance was sui generis and hence unamenable to linguistic choice yielded in this theory to a more experientially valid conception, namely, that during the writing process, writers considered different ways of phrasing thought, settling on that formulation which best expressed the meaning intended.

Though Milic's analysis provided a sounder pedagogy for style study than a unitarian theory afforded, it did so by presenting us with a crux. To allow for the possibility of choice, it maintained the interchangeability of linguistic forms; but at the same time, and in opposition to the egalitarianism implied in the doctrine of synonymity, it proposed

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hierarchy. Though there are multiple ways of saying the same thing, one way, it appears, is better than another, or as Milic puts it, "The writer intends to express something (idea) and he struggles with possibilities until he finds the formulation which best expresses it."[3] By this token, dualism, supported by the belief in equivalent structures, subtly alters its shape, arising at the moment of expression as something very like the fusion of form and content. Even if we grant that the route from multiplicity to singleness represents a continuum, the ranking implicit in "best" suggests that synonymity does not adequately explain the relations between intention and expression. If it did, there would be no "best" way; alternative structures would simply be interchangeable, as Milic elsewhere affirms.[4]

In part, the difficulty arises from attempting to transfer a doctrine drawn from contextually innocent sentences to a composing process governed by rhetorical constraints. According to its adherents, the doctrine of synonymity can be illustrated by sentences sealed off from their discourse environment, isolated and self-complete. As Ross Winterowd explains it, we need only examine sentences such as "Man bites dog" and "Dog is bitten by man" to recognize that "two different sentences can share the same meaning."[5] Similarly, Jane Walpole argues that "we must accept the possibility (indeed the necessity) of synonymity; two or ten differently phrased

sentences can, we must agree, 'mean the same thing.'"[6] Meaning, as these critics use it, apparently refers to mere sense or sense that can be paraphrased without doing violence to the conceptual substance of the sentence; and, indeed, on this level, the doctrine of synonymity seems tenable. But as I. A. Richards reminds us, utterances viewed in their rhetorical setting exhibit a far more complicated meaning structure than mere sense can accommodate, operating on multiple levels to "give us different kinds of meaning--mere sense, sense and implications, feeling, the speaker's attitudes to whatever it is, to his audience, the speaker's confidence, and other things."[7] In short, Richards advises, utterances serve a plurality of meaning functions, at times, and often simultaneously, pointing to "(i) Symbolization of reference; (ii) The expression of attitude to listener; (iii) The expression of attitude to referent; (iv) The promotion of effects intended; (v) Support of references."[8] In his preface to Stylists on Style, Louis Milic makes a similar, if narrower, point reminiscent of Richards' distinction between scientific and emotive language:

> . . . it . . . becomes necessary to distinguish between two kinds of meaning: referential or cognitive meaning, which denotes the substance of what is being said (the difference between 'Literature cannot exist in a vacuum' and 'People

> cannot exist in a vacuum'); and <u>affective</u> or <u>expressive</u> meaning, which refers to the means for producing different effects on the reader (the difference between 'Literature cannot exist in a vacuum' and 'Writers must be concerned with society').[9]

Richards' description of <u>different kinds of meaning</u> which ultimately spring from rhetorical aims probably accounts for the disjunction I have earlier described. If synonymity can help us describe symbolic notations whose conceptual sense may be roughly equivalent, it is of limited use in guiding the formulation of a particular utterance, which must, if it is part of a whole discourse, embed conceptual sense in a complex rhetorical network.[10] For this larger purpose, the writer must choose from additional linguistic resources, more finely attuned to a rhetoric of utterance which is inclusive of, but not limited to, cognitive sense. And I suspect that it is this choice, when it succeeds in adapting linguistic form to the rhetorical aims of utterance, that we applaud when we use normative epithets such a "best" or "most effective" to describe stylistic achievement. Though we may perhaps resist acknowledging the agreement between form and meaning that such epithets imply--lest, perhaps, we revive the rigidity of Croce's one thought, one form--we are nonetheless recognizing their integration, if only implicitly.

If I am correct in assigning a rhetorical significance to our customary descriptions of stylistic excellence, it follows that for the purpose of teaching style, the theory of rhetorical

dualism is of limited use, since the doctrine of synonymity on which it relies provides no guidance for making the best choice among alternative modes of expression. To look to other theories of style for guidance in the making of meaning is to encounter a similar problem, for current definitions such as style is the man or style as organic form or style as deviation from a norm derive from the analysis of already completed discourse and hence tell us little about the composing process. Only the theory that style is choice directs attention to authorial consciousness, but even here the theory is useful only to the degree to which it affirms that choice is directed and limited by rhetorical constraints. Choosing from among supposedly equivalent structures, as synonymity would have it, cannot serve a rhetorical theory of style.

Notwithstanding its limitations, style as choice offers a beginning for developing a theory of style that is both rhetorical and process-centered. My own modification of this theory--and one I have found useful in my teaching--goes like this: "Style is the adaptation of form to rhetorical aim(s)." Though such a formulation preserves the classical distinction between language and thought and thus allows for the possibility of choice among alternative language structures, it offers several advantages: it is more overtly process-centered, as "adaptation" implies; it acknowledges the relationship between meaning structures and aim; it suggests that form and meaning ultimately coincide; and it

allows for the acquisition of linguistic forms as preliminary to their use in a rhetorical setting. Moreover, a formulation which joins rhetorical aim to stages in the development of stylistic competence affords a means of reconciling monistic and dualistic theories of style--theories traditionally considered incompatible.

Adapting the definition I have proposed to composition teaching requires at the outset a somewhat altered classification of the meanings we usually ascribe to style. Though the term is notoriously polysemous, it is possible, I think, to discern three distinct categories which can be classified according to their degree of reliance on rhetorical considerations. Considered as a purely formal feature, style may appear in instructional guises that go something like this: "Be sure to follow the style of academic documentation" (style as format); "Standard edited English is the style likely to be acceptable to your readers" (style as grammaticality); "Try to write in a clear style" (style as readability); "Varied sentence patterns promote a pleasing style" (style as syntactic variation); "Density of embedding is characteristic of a mature style" (style as syntactic complexity). Such stylistic counsel is common in composition teaching, and I do not mean to question its importance for inexperienced writers. Notwithstanding, it is well to recognize that when we urge such a view of style, we are, in effect, insisting on stylistic autonomy; we assume the

absolute good of a particular formal feature regardless of its rhetorical matrix. Accordingly, these matters can be thought of as the formal characteristics of style which are part of, but not synonymous with, style in the rhetorical sense I have proposed.

A second category, more sensitive to the contextual roots of utterance, can be discerned in stylistic counsel that calls attention to the dependence of linguistic forms on such extra-linguistic constraints as occasion, audience, and genre. Though not altogether adequate to the complexity of rhetorical style, this kind of stylistic instruction at least adjusts formal elements to the demands of the rhetorical situation, usually by proposing levels of diction and syntax appropriate to specified types of discourse, and by outlining strategies for gaining special emphasis or effect. Such relativization of usage recalls the classical doctrine of stylistic propriety--what in more modern dress John S. Kenyon calls the "functional varieties" of discourse[11] or Martin Joos classifies as the five types of English usage.[12] In my own teaching, I prefer to label these matters the rhetorical conventions of style, which call forth, in turn, the formal characteristics of style appropriate to the discourse undertaken.

A third meaning of style arises in connection with stylistic analysis, usually of the literary text. Richard Lanham describes

it as the "opaque style" which eschews the "transparent style" of "scientific clarity" in order to call attention to itself.[13] I call it the aesthetics of style to designate the union of form and substance that manages to make style itself expressive of the meaning structures set forth. Its genealogy among theories of style is the doctrine of organic form, which is thought by its critics to disallow style teaching since style in this theory is indivisible from thought and is hence not an isolable quality. The difficulty here is that however valid the objection, it does not stand the test of experience, since texts have readers who quite naturally respond to what they read. While the source of this response is various, it is fair to say that an author's verbal strategies do play a part--that, in short, discourse produces an effect which can, in turn, be traced to a linguistic source. If, then, style constitutes a form of rhetorical appeal, as David Lodge has persuasively argued,[14] the doctrine of organic form can be reasonably considered rhetorical and can be used to scrutinize (and certainly is so used, in practice) those traits of style that appear to account for a felt effect.

The question of reading is of course crucial, since we commonly use stylistic analysis in composition teaching to help students acquire stylistic competence in their own writing. We believe, in short, that there exists a reciprocity between the act of reading and the act of writing. If, however, we listen to the critics of organic form as a useful means of style instruction, it would appear that reading--or at least

the reading of a literary text--is substantially different from learning to write. Thus Jane Walpole advises that the view of style as option rests on an "acknowledged distinction between style in literature and style in composition."[15] A more detailed version of this conviction is set forth by E. D. Hirsch:

> The study of style in literature is a study of the fusion of form with content. But learning how to write implies just the opposite assumption: it assumes the separation of linguistic form and content. Learning the craft of prose is learning to write the same meaning in a different and more effective way.[16]

According to Hirsch, there is a clear-cut distinction to be made between product and process, between the completed literary artifact and the act of writing. But contrary to the view that ends and means exist in some kind of opposition, it is possible to argue that discourse which exhibits the harmonious agreement of form and substance bespeaks an authorial consciousness different in degree but not in kind from the student writer's own. We have only to glance at the worksheets of most professional writers to discover that final unity is gained only after considerable revision. That we do not see these changes in the completed version does not mean that they do not exist but only that the writer has completed her experimentation, settling on that choice which best expresses

the meaning structures intended.[17] From this point of view, dualism and monism do not stand in qualitative opposition, as Hirsch seems to assume, but represent compatible features of the composing process; they are simply stages in the production of discourse.

A rhetorical and developmental theory of style can also accommodate various methods of teaching style--even those whose usefulness has sometimes been questioned. If, for example, we regard the formal characteristics of style as transformable into enabling strategies that can nurture the production of style in its rhetorical sense, it is theoretically and practically defensible to consider sentence-combining (commonly urged in the name of stylistic competence) a useful instructional tool. Instead of dismissing the technique because it bears "only a tangential relationship to the real use of language"[18]--a common charge--I see it as part of an acquisition/application stylistic continuum. So considered, the manipulation of a-rhetorical sentence patterns are for the developing writer what the practice of extra-compositional scales, arpeggios, and trills are for the novice pianist--preliminary finger exercises designed, as degree of competence requires, to enrich and perfect technique.

To anchor these techniques to a rhetoric of style we can draw on a number of studies and approaches that seek "the reintegration of thought to expression."[19] The phrase is James Kinneavy's, whose pioneering analysis of the various

aims of discourse includes a rich description of the conventions of style characteristic of discourse types. In addition, Kinneavy provides a number of comparative exercises that help students perceive how discourse with similar content can be significantly different rhetorically, depending on the writer's aim. Edward P. J. Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student similarly treats the interdependence of style and aim, according special attention to a number of stylistic strategies described in classical inventories of style and still very much in use in modern discourse.[20] Corbett's collection of advertisements that rely on tropes and schemes affords a good means of rapidly sensitizing students to the rhetoric of style, as does Walker Gibson's analysis of ad style in Tough, Sweet and Stuffy.[21]

Studies in the aesthetics of prose style can equally help us enrich student perception of the rhetoric of style. Though addressed for the most part to a scholarly audience, such studies afford insights into the congruence of style structures and content that can be adapted to classroom use. Possibly the fullest guide to this type of style study is David Lodge's Language of Fiction, which argues that the language of literary prose is "essentially rhetorical," offering in support verbal analyses of passages drawn from literary texts.[22] A teaching text like Charles Kay Smith's Styles and Structures combines analyses of the expressive function of style in prose discourse with writing exercises designed to

encourage student use of similar strategies.[23] Useful, too, in raising student awareness of how language structures can themselves be expressive of meaning are the insights of a reader-response critic like Stanley Fish (in his early criticism), whose emphasis on the verbal strategies writers use to produce particular effects is of considerable importance in a rhetorical model of style pedagogy.[24]

The transition from style analysis to style production follows the logic of a process-centered model, which not only allows for stages in the acquisition of stylistic competence but proposes that the proper object of style study in composition teaching is ultimately the student's own work. Such a view assumes that the production of student discourse issues from an authorial consciousness which differs in degree but not in kind from the composing consciousness of the accomplished writer. Given the substantial evidence that many writers engage in stylistic experimentation before settling on a final version, it assumes further that the student writer equally tinkers with alternative constructions in the course of composing. Finally, it proposes that these very trials and uncertain, preliminary gestures--recoverable to us as the worksheets of the professional writer often are not--are themselves the most fertile sources of style instruction, allowing us to explore and question the rhetorical effectiveness of the alternative choices made. In short, a process-centered model of style instruction places <u>evolving</u> discourse at the core of the instructional program.

To act on this developmental view of style mastery is to invite peer scrutiny of student writing at every stage of production, even the most tentative. The interchange invites students to exercise the skills acquires in stylistic analysis, but with the vital difference that in this case the discourse examined requires for completion the reader's stylistic judgment.[25] In effect, the reader comes to participate in the author's task, thereby affirming the rhetorical reciprocity between reader and writer. Such an act of critical intelligence profoundly sensitizes students to the rhetorical subtlety of stylistic choice; ultimately it offers the surest guide to a style pedagogy adequate to the richness and complexity of human utterance.

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Endnotes

[1] Louis Milic, "Theories of Style and Their Implications for the Teaching of Composition," College Composition and Communication, 16 (May 1965), 66-69, 126.

[2] Ibid., p. 126.

[3] Ibid., p. 68.

[4] Louis Milic, "The Problem of Style," in Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings, ed. Ross Winterowd (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 278. To illustrate synonymity, Milic rephrases a sentence of Swift's to show how the same set of words can be differently arranged and still yield the same meaning. The example allows for no "best" way; differently phrased versions of the same sentence are simply equivalent.

[5] Ross Winterowd, "Introduction" to Louis Milic, "The Problem of Style" in Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings, p. 271.

[6] Jane Walpole, "Style as Option," College Composition and Communication, 31 (May 1980), 206.

[7] I. A. Richards, Interpretation in Teaching (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), p. 135.

[8] C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 8th ed., 1946), pp. 267-8.

[9] Louis Milic, Stylists on Style (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1969), p. 2. In effect, Milic's distinction modifies his reliance on synonymity as the sole gauge of meaning.

[10] Even on the level of the sentence, the same words differently arranged may often mean differently. Consider, for example, the difference in emphasis as between "Socrates is wise" and "Wise is Socrates." Though these two sentences yield a similar paraphrasable meaning, they are not equivalent rhetorically.

[11] John S. Kenyon, "Cultural Levels and Functional Varieties of English," College English, 10 (October 1948), 31-36.

[12] Martin Joos, The Five Clocks (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967).

[13] Richard A. Lanham, Style: An Anti-Textbook (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 44-68.

[14] David Lodge, Language of Fiction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), x.

[15] Walpole, 211.

[16] E. D. Hirsch, Jr., The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 141.

[17] To the possible objection that we cannot recover an author's creative processes, I would respond, with Jonathan Culler, that a writer's choices "will be made on the basis of their effect" which are then "open to observation" by

the reader. Moreover, Culler advises, we can, to a degree, verify our perceptions and at the same time speculate about authorial choice by making "alterations in the language of a text so as to see how this changes . . . effects" (Structuralist Poetics [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975], 116-117). Though Culler is here speaking of the literary text, his observations can be usefully applied to all discourse types.

[18] Ross Winterowd, Style," in Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings, p. 254. Recent work in sentence combining has, to some degree, met objections to its a-rhetorical nature. See especially Donald Daiker, et al, The Writer's Options (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

[19] James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 32.

[20] Edward P. J. Corbett, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). Corbett has also proposed a method for analyzing prose style which moves in two stages from a quantitative tabulation of selected linguistic features of a text to an interpretation of their rhetorical function. See Edward P. J. Corbett, "A Method of Analyzing Prose Style with a Demonstration Analysis of Swift's 'A Modest Proposal,'" in Contemporary Essays on Style, ed. Glen A. Love and Michael Payne (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969), pp. 81-98.

[21] Walker Gibson, Tough, Sweet and Stuffy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. 71-89.

[22] Lodge, x. For a useful collection of shorter studies, see Style in Prose Fiction: English Institute Essays, 1958, ed. Harold C. Martin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

[23] Charles Kay Smith, Styles and Structures: Alternative Approaches to College Writing (New York: ". W. Norton & Co., 1974).

[24] Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," New Literary History, 2 (Autumn 1970), 123-61.

[25] In my own teaching, I like to prepare students for this activity by having them examine several drafts of a piece of student writing to determine the effectiveness of changes in style. To avoid the impresionistic responses that might otherwise substitute for precise stylistic description, I often append a style guide. Here, for example, is one such exercise designed to show how changes in word placement and syntax can heighten a particular rhetorical effect:

First Draft

> This course was not much easier. I was making vigorous attempts to advance. Mud covered my shins. I slowly tried again, only to discover that I was sinking in an area of quicksand. Mud reached my knees. To struggle further would be suicidal.

Second Draft

This course was not much easier. I tried vigorously to advance, only to find that the mud had crept up to my shins. I tried again, slowly. But again I could barely move. Suddenly, I felt myself sinking, and then I knew. Quicksand. I was trapped, imprisoned, helpless. The mud had reached to my knees. To struggle further would be suicidal.

Style Guide

1. What changes do you see in the second paragraph? Why do you think the writer substituted "tried" for "was making," "vigorously" for "vigorous attempts"?
2. Note the position of the adverb "slowly" in both paragraphs. Why do you think the writer shifted its placement in the rewritten paragraph?
3. In the second version, the writer introduced "quicksand" as a sentence fragment. Why do you think she did so?
4. What is the effect of the series "trapped, imprisoned, helpless" in the rewritten paragraph. What would be the difference in effect if the student had written "I was trapped and I began to feel helpless and imprisoned"?
5. What is the overall effect of the rewritten paragraph? Do you find that the word choice and sentence structure of this paragraph echo the feeling of the narrator?